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ABSTRACT

The way the author's experiences of the city of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) shaped her visual literacy are explored. Along with the imagery of the steel mills, she experienced some artistic opportunities that helped shape the foundation of her life in art. Although no American city was as extensively industrialized as Pittsburgh, it was the artistic life of the city that influenced her most. Among the cultural institutions she notes are the Carnegie Library and the Carnegie Museum, the Nationality Rooms of the University of Pittsburgh, the Young Men and Women's Hebrew Association, the Syria Mosque, Schenley Park, and the Squirrel Hill Area. As a city, Pittsburgh benefited from the philanthropy of its patrons through the quality of life they enhanced and the creative energies the institutions attracted. (Contains 8 references.) (SLD)

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Pittsburgh and the Arts
or
How My Eye Was Formed

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by
Susanne A. Roschwalb

I learned visual literacy as a child of Pittsburgh in the second half of the 20th century. The steel city was a remarkable influence in my aesthetic sensibilities. I carry with me the image of the red-hot, molten slag running down the hillside at night, of the black dust belched by the smokestacks by day. Along with the imagery of the steel mills, as a resident of the industrial city I was given some artistic opportunities that helped shape the foundation for my life in art.

William Blake once wrote "As the eye is formed...such are its powers." The story I am about to tell concerns the influence of Pittsburgh's cultural institutions on me in my first decade of life, how my eye was formed by the steel city, and the impact on the rest of my life.

No American city was so intensively industrialized as Pittsburgh. It was Pittsburgh that gave airplane pilots the light of a hundred blast furnaces which glowed all night as their main navigational guide. It was Pittsburgh that gave the world modern food processing, AC electricity, the first mass-produced oil, steel, aluminum and glass.

But, it was the artistic life that the city gave to me. "Give me your child before the age of ten," said Pittsburgh's art institutions, "and she will be with us for the rest of her life."

And it was true. I grew knowing the names of certain artists who did their best work in Pittsburgh. I heard the music of Stephen Foster, saw paintings by Mary Cassatt, was reading stories by Willa Cather, went to Gene Kelly's dancing school, and later studied under a disciple of Martha Graham's. I was told about George S. Kaufman, Rachel Carson, and as a teenager, worked with Fred Rogers.

The region was unusually rich in musicians, painters, photographers, filmmakers and writers. Not only Stephen Foster, but Errol Garner, Art Blakey, Billy Eckstein, Byron Janis, and Lorin Mazel made music in Pittsburgh. American

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scholarship has not studied this remarkable city for its contribution to the arts. A staggering productivity has come out of Pittsburgh including Andrew Carnegie's several thousand public libraries around the world, George Ferris' carnival wheels, Stephen Foster's songs. Seven of Pittsburgh's fabled collections of art have left the city. I have worked and/or enjoyed three of them in Washington, D.C. -- Andrew Mellon's canvases and Paul Mellon's modern paintings at the National Gallery, and Duncan Phillips exquisite Post-Impressionist art at the Phillips Gallery.

Now, three decades after I left Pittsburgh, I can remember each artistic fount and cultural reservoir that served me so well. I have enjoyed the privilege of revisiting these institutions to discuss them with you with a child's love and an adult's eye.

Carnegie Library and Carnegie Museum

Andrew Carnegie, born in a weaver's cottage in Dunfermline, Scotland in 1835, came to the United States in the mid-19th century. When Carnegie was a boy in Allegheny city, a Colonel Anderson had opened his personal library of 400 volumes to the mechanics and workmen of the town. Every Saturday, Andrew went to the Colonel's house to exchange books. "No one but he who has felt it can know the intense longing for the arrival of Saturday and a new book," he said.

Hard work and shrewd investments in bridge-building, railroad sleeping cars, oil wells and the steel mills of Pittsburgh had made Carnegie wealthy. He gave away most of his money and the principal object of his philanthropy was the public libraries he created in the English-speaking world.

In 1910 Carnegie gave $6.4 million to Pittsburgh for a library, concert hall and museum. The importance of the Carnegie Institute for Pittsburgh goes beyond its size. Architecturally, the eight-acre building is the grandest monument to Beaux-Arts planning in the city. The competition for the design of the library was the most heralded contest in American architecture up to that time and drew entries from 96 architects in 28 cities. Culturally, it marked the end of the Dark Ages for a town that had wealth but little real culture before the Institute opened. (Willa Cather wrote a short story, "Paul's Case," which is partially set in the library and music hall.)

Altogether, Carnegie donated $56 million for 2,509 library buildings and, by the end of his life had given away more than $333 million for philanthropies.

I visited Carnegie Library every week from the time of my first library card at age seven. I was taken to chamber music concerts in the Music Hall and learned the great piano concerti from records I listened to in the non-print section. I saw my first art exhibits in the art gallery. Years later, I worked on two

White House Conferences for Library and Information services, my way of saying thank you to Andrew Carnegie.

Nationality Rooms-University of Pittsburgh

In 1920, John Bowman was appointed chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh. He decided to create the most extravagant college building in the world. Bowman needed a building that would be a towering beacon to raise the importance of Pitt over an industrial landscape that had little use for education. (Pitt is now the city's largest employer.)

Originally, it was to be the second tallest skyscraper in the world. Bowman got the site from the Mellons. The designer was Charles Klauder, a Philadelphian. Construction began in 1926, continued to 1929, and was not completed until 1937. The tower is a 40 story elevation. Functionally, it never worked well, but for Bowman, the objective was to create a physically and psychologically dominating architectural piece. In that he succeeded. For a million working class parents in Western Pennsylvania, higher education means getting their children into what became known as the "Cathedral of Learning" at Pitt.

A remarkable part of the University is the Nationality Rooms, conceived in the 1920's by sociologist Ruth Crawford Mitchell as a means of linking the University with the immigrant cultures of steelworking families. Each room is a reproduction of a specific environment from fifth-century B.C. Athens through eighth century A.D. China.

While all of the rooms are interesting, I appreciated some over others. I have traveled around the world and worked on arts promotion projects on behalf of seven or eight countries, all of which I first glimpsed through the Nationality Rooms. What a way to learn cultural diversity.

As the first generation child of parents from Czechoslovakia, I was fascinated by the Czech room. The room evokes memories of a Slovak farmhouse and one of the world's oldest universities. The words "Pravda Vitezi" (truth will prevail) proclaim the motto of the Czech Republic.

Prague artists Karel and Marie Svolinsky painted the beamed ceiling with botanically accurate flowers and plants familiar to every Czech. Their "tree of life" design surrounds the text of the Proclamation by Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, which marked the founding of the University of Prague in 1348. Murals depicting miraculous trees bearing flowers and fruits, and harboring animals, birds and insects decorate the plaster reveals of the bay window area.

Ceiling panels portray eight famous persons in Czech and Slovak history. A portrait of Thomas Masaryk, President-Liberator of Czechoslovakia

Figure 1. Cathedral of Learning

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dominates the front wall. Fine embroidered lace, Bohemian crystal and other treasures are displayed with the room's archives in the wall cabinet.

Twenty years after I left Pittsburgh, and forty years after my mother left Prague, we took a trip to reclaim our roots. The city of Kafka, Mozart and the great filmmakers of the 1920's was a place I was prepared to adore.

Other rooms that planted seeds of interest to countries I later visited: English, Scottish, German and Italian Rooms. But the Greek and Russian rooms foreshadowed adventures. The Greek Room with gleaming white Ionic columns, pilasters and doorway quarried from Mount Pentele, the same mountain that yielded the marble used to build the Parthenon, and student chairbacks with the names of Greek Islands and towns, was an inspiration. Greece was among the first foreign countries I visited. And, when I worked on the promotion of the exhibition "The Search for Alexander," and took a group of American art critics to Macedonia to visit the tombs and objects *in situ*, I was so much at home I even believed I was Greek in another life.

The most exciting was the Russian Room, glorious in religious symbols, animal motifs and floral patterns. The vishivka, contains 16th & 17th century brocade, petit point, appliqued and embroidered damask and velvet,which depicts Moscow's patron saint, St. George, slaying the dragon. A replica of a family icon hangs above a corner cupboard. The room, with its Byzantine and folk motifs, seemed wonderful to me as an elementary school visitor. A year and a half ago, when I visited Moscow as part of a delegation of mass communication professors, the wonder continued. It was, in fact, the most exciting trip of my life.

THE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN'S HEBREW ASSOCIATION (NOW KNOWN AS 315 S. BELLEFIELD)

The Y was a product of Edgar Kaufmann - the same Kaufmann who, in 1913, purchased the first of 1,500 acres for a country retreat that is now world-famous as "Fallingwater." The retreat was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built in 1937. Overall, Kaufmann was Wright's outstanding patron. Their partnership lasted twenty years and yielded nearly a dozen uncompleted projects in addition to two that were realized.

The Y, however, was designed by Benno Janssen in 1924. The building married one facade from the Italian Renaissance and another from eighteenth century Virginia. That improbable combination worked in form and function. I entered the Y regularly to study dance, to teach art to young children and to perform in musicals.

SYRIA MOSQUE

Pittsburgh society has always been gregarious. Church clubs, singing clubs, sports and general

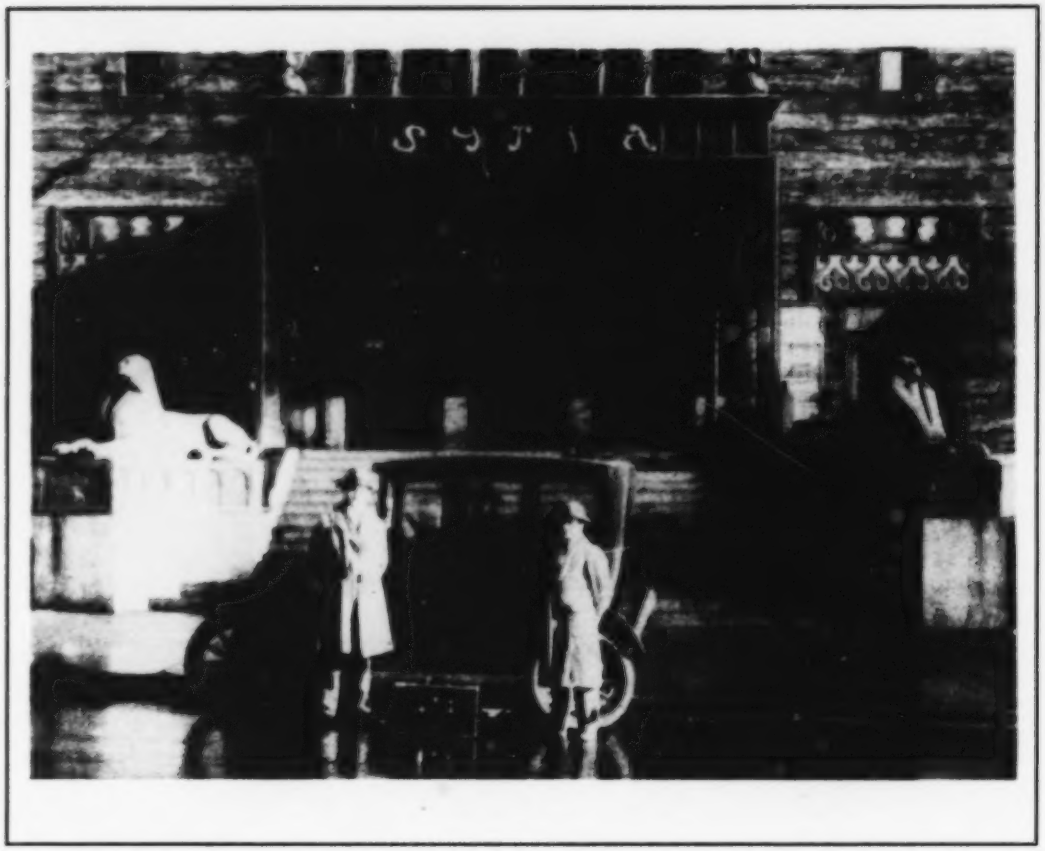

Figure 2. Syria Mosque

purpose social clubs number in the hundreds. Approximately two dozen clubs are regarded as exclusive with a concentration of these in Oakland. The Syria Mosque was on Bigelow Boulevard from 1915 until its misguided demolition a few years ago. It had many peculiarities, from its Arabic inscription to its complicity in the death of Eleanora Duse, who died after she was caught in a downpour outside its locked stage door. The building represented a Hollywood view of Islamic culture; silky bronze sphinxes, stalactites on the cornice and a Hagia Sofia saucer dome poking through the roof.

But the building functioned wonderfully well as a theater and concert hall for 3700 spectators. The Pittsburgh Symphony played here for years under Fritz Reiner. There I saw the productions of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. From ballet, I learned to see beauty in discipline and perfect motion. After each performance, my mother took me to the elegant Webster Hall, then a hotel and now an apartment house, for petits fours and hot chocolate.

MARY SCHENLEY AND HER PARK

The Oakland section would have become another worker neighborhood in Pittsburgh had it not been for a woman

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who clung to its past. The woman was Mary Schenley. Mary Elizabeth Croghan Schenley was barely out of her teens when she inherited one thousand acres of choice land in central Pittsburgh from the holdings of her grandfather.

She chose not to live in Pittsburgh. At fifteen, she eloped with a captain in the British army who was twice-widowed and three times her age. But she retained her loyalty and, in 1893 she donated 400 acres to create Schenley Park as the eastern border of Oakland. When she died in 1903, she had not set foot in Pittsburgh for forty years.

The decisive move in the creation of Beaux Arts' Oakland was made in the next year, 1904, when when Andrew Carnegie weaned away twenty acres of Schenley Park had already received Phipps conservatory in 1893, an artificial ice rink, a band shell, a racetrack, and electrically operated water organ, and extensive boating facilities on the artificially created Panther Hollow Lake.

Edward Manning Bigelow, the head of city planning, directed the design of four bridges to give the city access to the new park. Two of these are now replaced, but the Panther Hollow Bridge arches over its gully as Bigelow intended, complete with four splendid bronze panthers. Panthers, actually mountain lions, mascot for Pitt, were hunted here until the early 19th century.

The wonderful band shell was the impetus for outdoor band concerts. These summer evening symphonic events were free and open to the public. They were the first place where I remember listening to music and watching the stars. Years later, when I helped plan some of the 82 free inaugural concerts for President Jimmy Carter, I remembered the spirit of community engendered by free, open-air concerts.

Also in Oakland, when I was young and impressionable, was the Pittsburgh Playhouse, where I first attended children's theater and later adult plays. That is where I learned that there is such a thing as the human condition and theater gives life to life. Years Later, when I became the publicist for Washington's famed resident, repertory company, Arena Stage, I remembered the smell and the sound of backstage and rehearsal theater from my youth.

SQUIRREL HILL--MY HOME

Brendon Gill, theater critic for the New Yorker, has said "If Pittsburgh were located in Europe, people would travel a thousand miles to visit it." I knew that as I grew up. I lived in the Squirrel Hill section. One of the prominent portals to Squirrel Hill is Shady Avenue. The corner is anchored in the neo-Georgian mansion occupied by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pennsylvania's largest art center, with classes, recitals, lectures, conferences, exhibits, happenings, and outdoor concerts.

I received a dance scholarship to the Center and studied modern dance under Rose McCurgie, a student of Martha Graham's. I danced to the music of Duke Ellington. I learned folk music and jazz. I also learned flower arranging at the center. Years later, when I represented the American Horticultural Therapy Association, I remembered the healing powers of working with miniature flower arrangements.

Squirrel Hill, by the way, became fashionable and populous, comparable to other major urban centers because of the advent of the electric trolley along Forbes and Murray Avenues in 1893, and the rebuilding of Beechwood Boulevard by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in 1903. Olmsted, of course, is the landscape designer of Central Park, major parks in Washington, D.C., the Vanderbilt estates, etc. I never knew that he had a hand in the great boulevard near where I lived.

The boulevard, in turn, brought the building of magnificent mansions, including the Mellon mansion with its 65 rooms, organ, sumptuous, Tiffany windows, lavish marble, and magnificent formal gardens. No getting away from it, the Mellon family, with its fortune in banking, copper, and steel, was the backbone of Pittsburgh. My final tribute is to their sense of philanthropy.

PITTSBURGH RENNAISSANCE

By 1940, after a century of industrialization, Pittsburgh labored beneath a sky heavy with soot. Housing was inadequate, traffic unbearable, and industrial sewage was being dumped into the city's rivers. Not surprisingly, property values in the central business district began to drop at a rate of ten million dollars per year. As is told in the exhibit "Pittsburgh Defines a City," the National Building Museum exhibition now at Allegheny Airport, the growing crisis was met by a coalition of men who previously had opposed one another.

Within fifteen years, Richard King Mellon, Mayor David Lawrence, and others accomplished the truly extraordinary: Pittsburgh's skies and rivers were clearer, flooding had been controlled and much of the downtown area transformed. The focus for Pittsburgh's Renaissance was the Golden Triangle. My schoolmates and I were given a vision in 1952 by a team of architects that the city would be transformed--and it was. In 1985, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was named the nation's most liveable city the the Rand-McNally *Places Rated Almanac*.

Pittsburgh today is the home of 175 nonprofit arts organizations. The arts contribute $121.7 million a year to the local economy, returning to the community eight times their cost of $15.5 million. To Pittsburgh, the arts account for a competitive edge in attracting new businesses as well as the creative professionals who run them.

I moved from Pittsburgh in 1960. After college, I became an arts promoter for Arena Stage, Washington D.C.'s premier repertory company; for the Smithsonian Institution's Performing Arts Division; and the National Portrait Gallery.

Later I promoted international art exhibitions for corporate clients. These included "The Search for Alexander," for Time/Life and the National Bank of Greece, "Northern Lights" for Volvo and the Scandinavian nations, and aboriginal exhibit for Australia, The El Greco Exhibit at the National Gallery. I have been a creative, professional arts promoter for a quarter of a century. An arts addict, I need the arts to live. I recognize the debt I owe to the City of Pittsburgh for helping me get started in the way I see.

As a Professor of Visual Literacy, I think there is a value in teaching a look at the familiar, how it came to be, and how it

affected those within its radius. As a city, Pittsburgh benefited from the philanthropic vision of its patrons both in the quality of life and through the creative energies that its institutions attracted.

This past summer, the National Gallery offered a series on cities. Their curator told the story of some of the great cities of the world through looking at paintings. I think the story of a city's impact on an individual is a valid exercise for students of visual literacy. It certainly was for me.

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